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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000588

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TAGS: [ELAB](#) [ETRD](#) [KMPI](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [MU](#)

SUBJECT: LABOR FEEDBACK ON ILO VISIT, NEED FOR TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

REF: A. MUSCAT 531

[1](#)B. MUSCAT 512

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. In meetings held April 3-4, an International Labor Organization (ILO) delegation met with Ministry of Manpower officials, employers and worker committee representatives to discuss ongoing labor reforms and proposed plans for technical assistance. Minister of Manpower Juma bin Ali bin Jumaa told employers to get ready: "Unions are coming." The delegation agreed to review ongoing reforms and return with compliance recommendations in mid-May. While most committee members are encouraged by imminent signs of reform, some were unimpressed with the ILO sales pitch and continued to press for details of planned technical assistance, arguing that without immediate access to basic skills building and union education, current members will be unprepared for 2007 elections to the Main Representative Committee. End Summary.

Maqbul's Commitments Under ILO Review

[1](#)2. An International Labor Organization (ILO) delegation held meetings in Muscat from April 3-4 to discuss ongoing labor reforms with the Ministry of Manpower and proposed technical assistance plans with Main Representative Committee (MRC) members. (Note: MRC is the Omani equivalent of a National Committee of Union Representatives. End Note.) According to MRC members with whom ILO met, the ILO's focus is on reforming the labor law first, arguing that without the necessary reform and implementing regulations, it will be difficult to provide detailed technical assistance to the committees. The ILO delegation discussed all the commitments made by Minister of Commerce and Industry Maqbul bin Ali Sultan in his March 26 letter to Congress (ref A) and is expected to return to Muscat mid-May with recommendations for compliance. Committee members were aware of, and encouraged by, the October 31 deadline pledged by Minister Maqbul.

Technical Assistance: This Year?

[1](#)3. In meetings with MRC members, employers, and the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), the ILO delegation discussed a possible timeframe for delivery of technical assistance. However, committee members complained to PoLOff that the ILO proposal is still vague (no agenda or workshop ideas were presented) and draws distinct links between Bahrain and Oman, something the committee members feel is unlikely to help their situation given the longer history of unionization in Bahrain. One committee member also complained that ongoing visits by the ILO, a recent visit by the Solidarity Center, and other offers of assistance appear to be duplicative efforts lacking central organization.

[1](#)4. The ILO delegation drew sharp but divided criticism over its projected timeframe for initial delivery of workshops in June, July, and August. While one MRC member complained that this was too soon, particularly given the lack of a detailed plan, others complained that it's been too long in the works. Regardless of commitment or plan, any implementor now will face the seasonal challenge of the impending "summer slow-down," when both public and private-sector Omanis take leave of the summer heat.

[1](#)5. Despite debate over ILO's plan and pace for technical assistance, committee members have already started taking advantage of other technical assistance opportunities in the region. Members developed strong ties with the Solidarity Center during that NGO's recent visit and have been invited to events in Kuwait and other regional capitals. The Arab Confederation of Free Trade Unions has also contacted the MRC

to offer assistance.

Labor Outreach on the Rise

16. In other labor-related news, public outreach and education on labor developments have been on the rise (see ref B for a recent example). The MRC has begun publishing public service announcements and press releases regarding MRC attendance at international labor forums. The MOM has also been active on the press circuit, sending the Director General of Labor Care to the Majlis al-Shura to discuss expatriate workers and appearing on popular radio talk shows to answer questions about the labor law.

COMMENT

17. MRC members are encouraged by the labor reform commitments made by Minister Maqbul, but are still struggling to fulfill even basic aspects of their existing mandate for lack of financial resources and training. Most members feel that without basic skills building and union education, current members will be unprepared for 2007 MRC elections and ILO participation in Geneva. Members opined that unless a technical assistance plan was devised soon, and delivered early enough, a genuine opportunity for progress would be missed.
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